



Yod

Revue des études hébraïques et juives

19 | 2014

Aharon Appelfeld, cinquante ans d'écriture

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/yod/2055>

DOI: 10.4000/yod.2055

ISSN: 2261-0200

Publisher

INALCO

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 May 2014

ISBN: 978-2-85831-214-6

ISSN: 0338-9316

Electronic reference

Yitzhak Ben-Mordechai, « Disability as Metaphor in Two Novellas of Aharon Appelfeld », *Yod* [Online], 19 | 2014, Online since 16 April 2014, connection on 02 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/yod/2055> ; DOI : 10.4000/yod.2055

This text was automatically generated on 2 May 2019.



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Disability as Metaphor in Two Novellas of Aharon Appelfeld

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Introduction

- 1 The novella *A Journey into Winter* was published in the year 2000, *And the Rage is Not Yet Over* in 2008.¹ The two novellas share many characteristics, such as a protagonist-narrator who tells his story in an autobiographical manner and a sincere, revealing tone. However, the most significant common characteristic is that the protagonists of the two novellas are handicapped; both are disabled people.
- 2 Appelfeld's mode of writing is neither mimetic nor realistic. I do agree with Yigal Schwartz' argument, in his book *Individual Lament and Tribal Eternity*, that Appelfeld is not an ideological writer and one cannot produce conclusive lessons out of his writings. Schwartz defines Appelfeld's mode of writing as lyrical and meditative.² While I fully support this position, it should be noted that in these two novellas Appelfeld presents protagonists and other characters with ideological views, sometimes even very assertive ones. As a matter of fact, the disability in the two novellas serves as an important mean to create and shape the protagonist's ideologies. It serves, also, as a metaphor of the Jews' severe human condition and their struggle to survive during the thirties and the forties of the twentieth century.
- 3 The first novella, *A Journey into Winter*, is about a boy named Kutty, from his early childhood to the age of about fourteen. Kutty is a stutterer. In the second novella, *And the Rage is Not Yet Over*, the protagonist is Bruno, an amputee-one-handed man. Bruno's right hand was cut-off when he was very young. The novella tells his story, from early childhood to the age of fifty-six. Both novellas share a common historical background:

the rise of the Nazi movement and World War II. *And the Rage is Not Yet Over* also deals with the concentration camps (although the explicit term is not mentioned) and, in addition, with the post-war period, including reference to the Zionist movement and, eventually, Bruno's frustrating Aliya—immigration—to Israel, and settlement in Tel-Aviv.

- 4 The beginnings of the two novellas are almost identical. *And the Rage is Not Yet Over* begins with a statement: "My name is Bruno Brumhart. In my childhood my right hand was chopped off" (p. 7). The second novella also begins with a personal statement: "My name is Kurt. Over the years my name was distorted and now they call me Kutty" (p. 5). Immediately afterwards Kutty describes his difficulty in speaking. Thus, right from the beginning, a strong bond is established between each protagonist and his disability. It is a metonymical bond as the disability becomes immediately part of the protagonists' identity.
- 5 In this context, one should ask himself what was Appelfeld's purpose in creating these disabled protagonists. However, given that only the author himself could answer this question, we should approach it from a different angle. For this matter, it would be useful to quote Gilles Deleuze, in one of his dialogues with Claire Parnet. Deleuze said: "The art of structuring a problem is very important. You have to invent a problem, to shape a certain aspect of the problem, before finding a solution".³
- 6 In fact, Deleuze follows and elaborates the ancient observations of Aristotle in his *Poetics*, about complication (or conflict) and unraveling. Appelfeld shapes Bruno and Kutty's physical condition in a radical manner in order to create an exceptional phenomenon of disability, through which he magnifies the issues he deals with and makes them extreme as well as unique. However, it should be noted that Appelfeld's lyrical mode of writing and his restrained writing-style, balance and moderate the extremes in the novellas and prevent them from being bizarre on one hand or melodramatic on the other.
- 7 Hence, the disabilities, or defects, of the protagonists make their personalities special and unique. They experience reality in their own way. Their physical condition forces them to struggle harder in order to survive. In gloomy Europe of the thirties and forties of the twentieth century, each of them must elaborate for himself an ideology and a course of action in order to adapt his deficiency to the tough reality. This is very clear in *And the Rage is Not Yet Over*. Influenced by a one of his teachers at school, a devoted Christian monk, Bruno strongly believes that he is a son-of-a-king (Appelfeld does not use the word "prince". The term he uses stresses the heredity of kingship and aristocracy that Bruno attributes to himself). Bruno believes that his mission in life is to turn all the Jews into sons-of-kings. In *A Journey into Winter*, Kutty, still a young boy, cannot yet form a personal ideology. Rather, he accepts, willingly and actively, an ideology and course of action suggested by Rudolf, Kutty's Jewish supervisor at his job as a service boy. Rudolf is furious about the softness and submissiveness of the Jews and praises a fighting spirit and physical fitness. When the German army approaches, he organizes the Jews and trains them to fight the Nazis. Kutty follows him voluntarily and serves as his loyal assistant.

A Journey into Winter

- 8 In *A Journey into Winter*, Kutty's disability is defined very loosely. One can even find contradictions in the definitions, as well as the practice of his disability. As a lyrical writer Appelfeld's purpose is not to characterize Kutty as a concrete realistic stutterer,

but rather to present a kind of stammerer or one that is “tongue-tied”, whose characteristics somehow vary throughout the story. Kutty is defined alternatively as a stutterer, tongue-tied, half-mute and a boy whose speech is blocked. There are times where his stuttering is harder and times when it’s less so. Sometimes he even conducts quite long conversations without any difficulties. As a result of the lyrical mode and the loose definitions, the stuttering and disability become symbolic rather than realistic. The disability becomes representative. The protagonist himself notices it. He says: “Sometimes I have the feeling that the stuttering has spread to all the organs of my body; that my mouth is only one of its extensions” (p. 168). On a different occasion he says: “In gloomy moments it seems to me that my stuttering is not limited to speech only; my writing stutters as well” (p. 91). It is clear that Kutty internalized his stuttering and it filled his whole being; it affected all his actions. As mentioned before, in the novella a metonymy is formed and it establishes a strong bond between Kutty’s personality and his disability.

- 9 Kutty is not the only disabled person in the novella. Three stutterers study with Kutty in the same class. Another stutterer is one of the few who works with him. Another Jew in the novella is slow of speech. In Shull there are many disabled people: few of them are blind, others amputees. There are also a blind preacher and a blind holy-man. The large number of disabled people cannot be accidental. It looks as if disability is a common Jewish characteristic, or alternatively, a common Jewish disease.
- 10 The large number of disabled Jewish people turns the disability in the novella into a representative phenomenon while strengthening the process of turning Kutty’s stuttering into a metaphor. According to this metaphor, disability is a kind of deficiency that can be found in every Jew. In the novella, the attitude of the Gentiles towards the Jewish deficiencies demonstrates the severely dangerous condition of the Jews in that period of time. For example, Kutty says that the Gentiles don’t like tongue-tied people and therefore they are targets of aggression and violence (p. 39). Later in the novella he says: “In every season there is a mad or unstable tenant that is maddened by the stuttering and he attacks me [...]” (p. 77). Regarding disability as a representative phenomenon and as a metaphor enables us, in almost all the descriptions of the attitudes towards people with speech difficulties, to easily replace the words stutterer and “one that is tongue-tied” with the word Jew or Jews. Namely, the Jews are the real targets of aggression and violence.
- 11 On the other hand, disability might also be considered as an advantage. Kutty’s stepmother says so in an obvious manner and the Jewish holy-man compares Kutty’s disability with that of Biblical Moses. He tells Kutty to preserve it like a very precious, dear object.
- 12 Regarding stuttering as a metaphor, a follower of Jacques Lacan, the psychoanalyst Darian Leader, made an illuminating distinction (although in a different context) concerning the phenomenon of stuttering:

One way of understanding the phenomenon of stammering would be to link it to the boy’s passage through the Oedipal structure and the problem of situating himself in relation to his father, the moment of assuming the mantle of speech. Speech would belong to the field of what one has, and hence any difficulty in assuming it would be indicative of a reticence to grasp something which belongs, symbolically, to someone else, to the father. [...] What matters is not the message, the dimension of what one is saying, but rather the place itself. [...] Stammering is

not a difficulty in speaking but a difficulty in assuming a place from which to speak, a position in a symbolic network.⁴

- 13 Following this argument, the implied meaning of the metaphoric stuttering in *A Journey into Winter* is the Jews' difficulty in finding a place for themselves in this world. In addition, it will be helpful to refer to Deleuze and Guattari who claim in their writings that stuttering is a significant characteristic of minor literature.⁵ In their book *Kafka-Toward A Minor Literature*, the two writers argue that "a minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language".⁶ The writer of a minor literature is, therefore, a sort of stutterer in his own language, a sort of foreigner within the language.⁷
- 14 Deleuze and Guattari's observation can be applied to real stutterers as well. It suggests that stuttering causes Kutty to feel and to act like a foreigner within his language and consequently feel and act like a foreigner in general. Once again, it's possible to replace here the word "stutterer" with the word "Jew" or "Jews", and construct a parallel equation in which the Jews in Europe are foreigners.
- 15 As a boy Kutty admires power. He admires, and therefore follows Rudolf, his powerful tough Jewish supervisor. Rudolf is the leader of a group of Jews that intend to fight the Nazis; Jews determined not to give up. The ending of the novella is open, so it is unclear whether Kutty survives the war, but the question of his survival is not the core of the ending. The main point is the readiness and determination of the Jews to fight and not to go like submissive sheep to the slaughter.

And the Rage is Not Yet Over

- 16 The second novella, *And the Rage is Not Yet Over*, is more lyrical. The core of its lyricism is a strong lyrical component of the protagonist's personality, an outcome of his subjectivity. As is well known, a lyrical story is usually subjective. The mental life of Bruno—the amputee—is rich and active and it affects his perception of reality. It is a very subjective perception and it imposes itself on reality. Influenced by this unreal perception Bruno treats his stump as a living organ with supernatural powers.
- 17 Just like the previous novella, right in the beginning a metonymical bond is established between Bruno and his disability. It is clear that Bruno fully accepts his disability. He does not try to hide it. One of his sleeves is always folded under the stump. His disability becomes a demonstration of deficiency; a demonstration of what is missing. Bruno's lyrical personality and his firm views enable him to deconstruct a very famous slogan that is mentioned in the novella: "A Healthy Soul in a Healthy Body". Bruno deconstructs it since he seems to be a man with a healthy soul in a crippled body. Bruno is also physically strong. This fact magnifies the inherent contradictions of his crippled body.
- 18 Bruno presents, as well as represents, a very original and radical argument concerning both physical integrity and bodily perfection. According to Bruno, every human being needs to have some kind of defect. Bruno believes that a defect is an advantage. He says: "Sometimes people with two hands look ridiculous. Their attitude towards their lives is too obvious. A man without a scar is a man without features, a man without qualities. And there are many such people, herds of people" (p. 7). Elsewhere in the novella he says that his stump is a gift and the joy of his life, that the stump opened new horizons for him

(p. 24, 82). In Bruno's mind, one must have a defect in order to have an individual personality, in order not to be part of those "herds of people".

- 19 From early childhood Bruno adopted the idea that he is a son-of-a-king and the Jews—all of them—are sons-of-kings. The source and reason of this idea is that only the Jews stood before god at the divine Biblical Mount Sinai event. Being an emotional person and not a consistent and clear thinking one, Bruno does not define or even clarify to himself the exact meaning of being sons-of-kings. He accepts this metaphor literally and internalizes it and it becomes part of his personality. It becomes the power that motivates him. After the war, he tries to convey this romantic and noble idea to the Holocaust survivors. He tries to convince them that they are also sons-of-kings since they belong to an aristocratic people and as such they have to act and behave accordingly.
- 20 Bruno belongs simultaneously to two minority groups: he is a Jew and he is also an amputee. One of the anti-Semitic slogans Bruno's schoolmates shout and write on the school walls is: "Death to the Jews and death to the amputees" (p. 30). This slogan forms another metonymy in the novella. It connects Jews and disability. In the novella it means that Jews have to be exterminated twice: once as Jews and once again as disabled, crippled people.
- 21 As mentioned before, Bruno treats his disability as an advantage and it shapes his ideas about being a son-of-a-king. He is concerned with the fate of the Jewish people more than with his own personal condition. He believes that what the Jews urgently need is to follow him and change their attitudes towards their disabilities, towards their inferiority, meaning they have to change their attitude towards their nationality, since they are members of a noble and aristocratic nation. In this matter, Bruno's view strongly opposes the Zionist claim that the Jewish people have to become normal just like any other nation. He says: "The survivors need nobility, not promises to live normal life. I like the Jewish agents who come from Palestine, but I hate their views. They promise the refugees normal life. And I ask them: what is normal life?" (p. 138). Bruno condemns normality but the alternative he offers is romantic and totally contradicts the mental condition of the Holocaust survivors. Thus, it is no wonder that they reject it angrily.

Conclusion

- 22 In the two novellas, Appelfeld, through disability, portrays magnified personal and collective fights for survival, as well as explorations of Jewish identity. In addition he suggests two options, one in each novella, for Jewish conduct during and after the war and the Holocaust. The first one, in *A Journey into Winter*, suggests fighting against whoever attacks the Jewish people. The Zionist movement would probably support such a response. It would be considered a normal, active, healthy response. The other option, in *And the Rage is Not Yet Over*, is different. Although it does not oppose the fight for life, it is set against one of the major principle of the Zionist movement: the urgent need of the Jewish people to become normal, just like any other nation. The core of Bruno's idea is that the Jews are not like any other nation.
- 23 One may wonder whether the protagonists of the two novellas represent Appelfeld own views concerning Jewish values and conduct. The question is particularly prominent in *And the Rage is Not Yet Over*, since Bruno holds an original thesis about the nature of the Jewish people. Generally speaking, Appelfeld's oeuvre indicates that he does not reflect

directly his own views. Rather, he tends to display, in his very special way, various attitudes and trends prevailing within the Jewish people. This is undoubtedly also the case with *And the Rage is Not Yet Over*. Bruno is indeed the central figure of the novella but apart from him there is another entity which is no less important. It is the collective entity of the Jewish people represented by a variety of minor characters who serve as a human panorama of Jewish views, beliefs and modes of existence. Appelfeld portrays them without taking a stand, neither recommending nor rejecting any of them.

- 24 *And the Rage is Not Yet Over* ends with Bruno's defeat. His idea to transform all the perplexed Holocaust survivors into sons-of-kings was sublime and noble but totally inapplicable, and therefore rejected. However, the Jewish entity in the novella was not defeated. The great diversity of modes of Jewish existence represents the vital and dynamic forces of the nation. According to Bruno—and in this case maybe according to Appelfeld as well—paradoxically, these forces are strengthened by the deficiencies of the Jewish people, and not least—by the awareness of these deficiencies. In *And the Rage is Not Yet Over* as well as in *A Journey into Winter* Appelfeld probably meant to say something about the nature of Jewish people and not just tell us about a brave stuttering boy and an armless romantic dreamer.

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NOTES

1. Aharon Appelfeld (2000; 2008). *And the Rage is Not Yet Over* was translated into French (2009, see bibliography). *A Journey into Winter* was not translated. Quotes from both books are from the Hebrew edition.
 2. Yigal Schwartz (1996), p. 57.
 3. Gilles Deleuze & Claire Parnet (1987), p. 1.
 4. Darian Leader (2003), p. 100. According to Lacan, the symbolic network includes language and all signs, symbols, meanings and representations.
 5. Simon O'Sullivan (2005), p. 105.
 6. G. Deleuze & Félix Guattari (1986), p. 16.
 7. G. Deleuze & C. Parnet (1987), p. 4.
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ABSTRACTS

Two of Appelfeld's novellas are fictional autobiographies of disabled Jewish persons. Kutti in *A Journey into Winter* is a stammerer and Bruno in *And the Rage Is Not Yet Over* is an amputee—one-handed man. The two novellas are written as monologues of their protagonists. Both of them begin with the same pattern as the protagonist introduces himself by stating his name and disability. The disability is an integral part and a major component of their identity.

Although the plots of the two novellas differ from each other, there is a significant paradigmatic similarity between the novellas. In both of them the disabilities and their implications are represented not in a realistic way but in lyrical one. They function as a metaphor through which Appelfeld examines the core and essence of the Jewish protagonists of the novellas.

This metaphor has a paradigmatic function. According to the paradigm, every Jew in the Diaspora has a kind of disability. This disability causes many problems and difficulties, but at the same time it is a virtue, an advantage. It makes the Jews special and unique, different from other people. It makes them think differently, have different morality and commitments. According to these two novellas this sublime disability is the core and essence of the uniqueness of the Jewish people.

Deux romans d'Appelfeld sont des autobiographies fictionnelles de juifs invalides. Kutti dans *Voyage vers l'hiver* est bègue, tandis que Bruno dans *Et la fureur ne s'est pas encore tue* a un bras en moins. Les deux œuvres sont des monologues de leurs protagonistes et toutes les deux commencent de la même manière : le protagoniste se présente en donnant son nom et en décrivant son handicap. Le handicap est une partie intégrante et une composante majeure de leur identité.

Même si les scénarios sont différents dans les deux textes, on y retrouve une similarité paradigmatique : les handicaps et leurs implications sont représentés de manière lyrique, plutôt que réaliste. Les infirmités fonctionnent comme des métaphores par lesquelles Appelfeld examine le cœur et l'essence des protagonistes juifs de ces romans.

Cette métaphore a une fonction paradigmatique. Selon ce paradigme, chaque juif de la diaspora a une infirmité qui est source de problèmes et de difficultés, mais qui représente en même temps

une vertu, un avantage. Elle rend les juifs uniques, différents des autres peuples. Elle les pousse à penser différemment, à avoir une morale et des exigences différentes. Selon ces deux romans, cette sublime infirmité représente le cœur et l'essence du peuple juif.

שתיים מן הנובלות של אפלפלד הן אוטוביוגרפיות פיקטיביות של בעלי מום. קוטי, הגיבור של "מסע אל החורף" הוא מגמגם ואילו ברונו ב" והזעם עוד לא נדם" הוא גידם. מומים אלה מתפקדים בנובלות כמטאפורה למצבו הקיומי של היהודי בגולה, ויש בהם לא רק משום חולשה אלא אף יתרון: הם מביעים את ייחודו ובמובן מסוים את עליונותו. הם מכריחים אותו לחשוב אחרת ולפעול אחרת. בשתי היצירות עיצובם אינו ריאליסטי אלא לירי.

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Keywords: Journey into Winter, And the Rage Is Not Yet Over, disability, lyrical style, Jewish identity, literature

"מסע אל החורף", "והזעם עוד לא נדם", נכות, סגנון לירי, הזהות היהודית **מילות מפתח:**

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